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A NOTE ON THE MONASTERIES FOUNDED DURING THE REIGN OF KING ABAS I BAGRATUNI

In studies devoted to the history of the Armenian people, the Armenian Church, Armenian architecture and Armenian monasticism, scholars have discussed the establishment of several new monasteries during the reign of King Abas I Bagratuni (929-953), and have attributed the revival of monasticism in Bagratid Armenia to monophysite Armenian clerics escaping religious persecutions in the Byzantine empire.

In the second volume of his *Patmut'iwn Hayoc'* ["History of Armenia"]¹, Mik'ayēl Č'amč'ean, who synthesized the information drawn from various medieval historians, presented the monastic revival in Armenia as follows:

There were also at about this time many other clerics of Armenian origin in the land of Egrisi who were not refugees but residents since [the time of] their ancestors. At that time, because of an incident instigated by the holy Council of Chalcedon, they were persecuted by the Greeks and came to Armenia where they built monasteries.

After this statement, M. Č'amč'ean presents certain details about the founding of the Monastery of Kamrjajor, and before he turns to the Monastery of Hořomos, he reminds the reader once again that the latter was also founded by Armenian clerics who had come¹ from Byzantine territory.

Likewise another Yovhannēs *vardapet*, who was driven away from the land of the Greeks together with many clerics came to the district of Širak where he built the monastery called Hořomos.

A few lines below this, speaking about the founding of the Monastery of Narek, the Mekhitarist historian states: "a multitude of ascetics, and still others educated in the land of the Greeks and trained in philosophy gathered there".

In his voluminous *Azgapatum* ["National History"], Archbishop Małak'ia Ōrmanean refers twice to the emigration of Armenian clerics in the 940s and the establishment of new monasteries in Armenia. Like his predecessor M. Č'amč'ean, he also synthesizes the information in

¹ Č'AMČ'EAN (1775), pp. 823-824.

the medieval sources and comments on them². Always citing his medieval sources, Ōrmanean attributes the persecutions against the Monophysite Armenian clergy to the Emperor Romanos Lekapenos.

Similar ideas are also expressed in Gēorg Mesrop's *Patmut'iwn hay ekelec'woy* ["History of the Armenian Church"]³ and in other more recent works. In contemporary studies the information about the establishment of the new monasteries and the conclusion about their founders are usually derived from either Č'amč'ean's or Archbishop Ōrmanean's works and are repeated as accepted facts.

The evidence about the flight of a large number of Armenian clerics from the Byzantine empire and their arrival in Bagratid Armenia during the reign of King Abas I does not seem to be convincing. First of all, there is no echo of such an event in the works of X-XI century Byzantine and Armenians historians. Secondly, only one XIII century Armenian source mentions Emperor Romanos Lekapenos's persecutions against the Armenian monophysite clergy.

It is a fact that in 943 the Emperor Romanos Lekapenos, having a premonition about his approaching death, exposed himself to the influence of certain Byzantine clergy known for their fanatical views and ordered persecutions against the Jews. The British historian Steven Runciman, influenced by M. Č'amč'ean's account, connects the persecution of the monophysite Armenian clergy with this event⁴. Yet, such a harsh measure could not have been taken against the Armenian monophysite inhabitants of the empire in the 930s and 940s, since the Byzantine court was cultivating good relations with the Bagratid and Arcruni kings of Armenia, who were recognized as allies and Byzantine titularies. On this point one can cite Constantine Porphyrogenetos and the correspondence exchanged between the Armenian and Byzantine courts. An example of this is the letter of King Gagik Arcruni of Vaspurakan in the *Girk' T'it'oc'* ["Book of Letters"]⁵. Moreover, at this time the Byzantine court would have been more permissive about religious differences between the Greeks and the Armenians so as not to arouse the feelings of the Armenian soldiery in the eastern themes of the empire, since the latter were still needed in order to restore the eastern borders of the empire. Because of such considerations Romanos

² ŌRMANEAN (1912), § 747, § 759 sq.

³ MESROP (1914), pp. 274-277.

⁴ RUNCIMAN (1963).

⁵ GAGIK, *Letter*.

would not have raised persecutions against the Armenian clergy in the eastern themes of the empire.

We must note that a few decades later, during the pontificate of Katholikos Xač'ik I (973-992), the Armenian church had ecclesiastical jurisdictions in Sebaste and Larissa with monophysite prelates presiding over them. According to the late tenth/early eleventh century historian Step'anos Asolik, in 886 these prelates adhered to Chalcedonian doctrine under pressure from the Greek metropolitan bishop of Sebaste⁶. This means that until that date, the Armenians had prelacies and bishops within the confines of the empire and that there was no persecution against them. Even after that date, a fanatical anti-Chalcedonian such as Bishop Uxtanēs, a late tenth century historian, was allowed to become the prelate of Sebaste. Also Katholikos Xač'ik I felt in no way restrained from establishing new ecclesiastical jurisdictions within the empire, "in Antioch, Syria, and in Tarsus, Cilicia, and in Sulnday and in all of those districts"⁷. The purpose of this paper is to reexamine the information of the medieval sources on the establishment of certain major monasteries in Bagratid Armenia.

As a general critique of the traditional methodology employed by Mik'ayēl Č'amč'ean and Małak'ia Ōrmanean, we must note that the latter frequently fail to differentiate primary sources from the secondary. In the present case, both authors have merely synthesized the contradictory information in the sources ranging from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries.

Both Č'amč'ean and Ōrmanean derived their information on the Bagratid monasteries from the same sources: the Histories of Step'anos Asolik, Samuēl Anec'i, Vardan Arewelc'i, and Kirakos Ganjakec'i. The latter two, who are both thirteenth century historians and schoolmates, present similar details about the establishment of the monasteries. Kirakos's account is more detailed.

And after him Romanos [became emperor]. He persecuted all the Armenian clergy and priests who were in the land of the Greeks, since they did not accept the doctrine of Chalcedon. And coming to the land of Armenia at the time of Abas son of Smbat, they established monasteries: Kamrjajor, Kaputk'ar in the district of Aršarunik', and the renowned monastery called Hořomos, and Dprevank' in the district of Širak. They also built a

⁶ ASOLIK, pp. 201-202.

⁷ ASOLIK, p. 256.

church in the name of the All Holy Theotokos in the monastery called Sanahin within the confines of the city of Lōrē. And since the priors were called *hořomoc' erēc'* ["priors of the Greeks"], the one monastery in Širak was named Hořomoc' monastery, which is still to this day called Hořomec'i monastery⁸.

Vardan Arewelc'i's account is as follows:

At his [King Abas's] time a large multitude of clerics who were driven out of the land of the Greeks for their orthodoxy came to our land [where] they built many monasteries: first Kamrjajor, and then the monastery called Hořomos, presumably because they came from the regions of the Greeks, and the Dpravank'. The Holy Theotokos [Church] at Sanahin is said to have been built by them⁹.

Both historians are in agreement about the fact that Armenian monophysite clerics living on the territory of the Byzantine empire fled the empire because of religious persecutions and came to Bagratid Armenia, where they established monasteries. The chronology of neither is specific but refers to the period of Romanos and Abas I, i.e., c. 930s or 940s. Despite Vardan's statement that those who arrived were numerous and founded many monasteries, both historians mention only three institutions. A fourth one mentioned by Kirakos is not known to Vardan. They both have obviously cited a few well known examples and refrained from presenting a complete list.

Vardan does not seem to be very certain about the etymology given to the name Hořomos, since he introduces the phrase "they came from the regions of the Greeks" with the conjunction *orpēs t'ē* ['as if']. Hořomos is mentioned twice in Kirakos's account. The first time it is referred to as a "renowned monastery", as if no other comment was necessary about its origin. The second reference at the end of the above passage, where the etymology of the place name is given, seems to be not only out of context but also an interpolation, unless one were to accept the existence of a monastery called Hořomec'i vank' in the district of Širak other than the renowned Hořomos. There is, however, no evidence in any other source to substantiate this.

In his *Chronicle*, the historian Samuēl of Ani, who lived and wrote in the twelfth century, comments briefly about the founding of the above monasteries, stating as follows:

⁸ KG, pp. 84-85.

⁹ VA, p. 88.

At his [King Abas's] time, [certain] holy congregations were established: Kamrjajor and Kaputk'ar in the district of Aršarunik', and the renowned monastery called Hořomos, and Dprevank' in the district of Širak¹⁰.

From this passage it is obvious that Samuēl knows nothing about the etymology of Hořomos and the origin of the founders of the new monasteries.

The source of the above three historians on the events of the tenth century seems to be the tenth/eleventh century historian Step'anos Asolik of Tarōn. In his *Universal History*, the latter presents a more elaborate account which differs from that of the thirteenth century historians. Besides Kamrjajor, Hořomos, Dprevank' and Sanahin, he also mentions the founding of Saint Grigor's Monastery of Xlajor, Vangoy vank', Movsisavank', Hnjuc' vank', Narekay vank', Hałbat and C'axac' k'ar.

Even though Step'anos Asolik was not an immediate contemporary of the men who established the above monasteries at the time of King Abas, he states that in his youth he had been acquainted with many old *vardapets* who were members of these institutions. One of these was Anania, considered to be the founder and first prior of the monastery of Narek. Consequently, Asolik's *History* could be considered a primary source on the founding of the above monasteries, more important and more reliable than the twelfth and thirteenth century sources.

There are a number of important differences between the account of Asolik and those of the thirteenth century historians Vardan and Kirakos. In the first place, Asolik's chronology is more specific. According to him, the monasteries of Kamrjajor, Hořomos, Narek, Xlajor, Movsisavank', Hnjuc'vank', Kaputk'ar, Dprevank' and C'axac' k'ar were founded during the reign of King Abas I and the pontificate of Katholikos Anania, that is, during the decade from 943-953, since according to my calculation, the beginning of Katholikos Anania's pontificate was either in 943 or 944¹¹.

Asolik knows nothing about a persecution against the monophysite Armenian clergy at the time of Romanos Lekapenos nor about the flight of Armenian clerics to Armenia. He is only aware of a widespread monastic movement in Armenia: "At this time [that is, at the

¹⁰ SA, p. 99.

¹¹ YD.

time of King Abas and Katholikos Anania] the monastic way of life flourished in Armenia and in many places dwellings for brothers were built, and coenobites gathered with the love of Christ"¹².

None of the founders of monasteries mentioned by Asoġik are from the Byzantine empire. The prior of the "renowned" monastery of Kamrġajor, Father Yovhannēs, "was driven away from the western land, the district of Egrisi, by the Chalcedonian sectarians who worship man". We must note here that Father Yovhannēs is mentioned only as the prior of the monastery and not as its founder. The name of the founder is not given by Asoġik. Father Yovhannēs brought with him from Egrisi "the wonderful instrument, the dominical sign". At his time, Asoġik himself had witnessed the miracles attributed to this cross: "And in our time we witnessed with our eyes many sick people afflicted with disease being cured". The rule of St. Basil prevailed at Kamrġajor¹³, where three hundred ascetics lived. Fr. Yovhannēs's successors were Poġikarpos and the renowned scholar Samuēl of Kamrġajor, who was well versed in the Holy Scriptures and in music. None of these men are said to have come from the Byzantine empire.

Asoġik gives us the name of the founder of Hoġomos: "But in the district of Širak, the monastery called Hoġomos was built by Yovhannēs". Yet he does not mention where Yovhannēs came from. It is also interesting to note that he knows the site of the monastery as Hoġomos but says nothing about the etymology of the name as being a derivative of *Hoġomoc'*, ["of the Greeks"]. If the original form of the name was Hoġomoc', as Kirakos wants us to believe, Asoġik would not have given us the corrupt form. He seems to be well acquainted with the monastery, which he describes as a resting place for travelers. We must conclude that the name of the monastic site was known as Hoġomos at Asoġik's time, and if it had any connection with *Hoġomk'*, Asoġik was not aware of it.

There is no reference to the founder of the monastery of Narek in the *Universal History* of Asoġik, even though the name of the presumed founder, Anania Vardapet, appears among the renowned doctors of the period¹⁴. We must note that neither Step'anos Asoġik nor other Armenian sources present any evidence about Anania as being an emigre from the Byzantine empire.

¹² ASOLIK, p. 173.

¹³ ASOLIK, p. 174.

¹⁴ ASOLIK, p. 178.

empire in 966, the Byzantine court tolerated the ecclesiastical status quo *ante*, so that the Armenian Church hierarchy of Tarōn still exercised control over some of the old Armenian territories now under Byzantine control. The prelates of Tarōn, who were probably chorepiskopoi, continued to preside over their traditional jurisdiction¹⁹.

Asolik knows a certain Father Sargis as the founder of Hnjuc' vank' in Karin, but says nothing about his origin²⁰. The same is also true for Father Step'anos who established C'axac' k'ar in Vayoc' jor. The founders of Kaputk'ar and Dprevank' are not mentioned. None of these, however, can be cited as evidence substantiating Kirakos's statement.

There is no information on the Holy Theotokos Church at Sanahin in the *Universal History* of Asolik. The latter states that the monasteries of Sanahin and Halbat were established during the reign of King Ašot III the Merciful (953-977)²¹. The late Karo Łafadaryan who studied the inscriptions of Sanahin, tried to reconcile Asolik's testimony with that of Kirakos, arguing that the church was built before the establishment of the monastery²². Although this is a possibility, yet it has escaped Łafadaryan's notice that according to Kirakos the church was built in the monastery of Sanahin; in other words, at the time of construction of the church, the monastery was already in existence.

Had indeed a multitude of Armenian clergy emigrated from the Byzantine empire because of religious persecution in the 930s or 940s, such an important event would not have been omitted by a staunch anti-Chalcedonian historian such as Step'anos Asolik. In various sections of his work the latter has dwelt at length on the theological controversies between the Armenians and the Greeks and has even incorporated in his *History* a lengthy letter of Katholikos Xač'ik I (973-992) addressed to the metropolitan bishop of Sebaste.

It is difficult to determine the source of both Kirakos's and Vardan's information about the religious persecutions in the Byzantine empire

¹⁹ ASOLIK, p. 182, states as follows: "Step'anos Vardapet the Great, who had the rank of the blessed Mesrob and as a pastor tended to the western part of Armenia, held a council of many clerics from Tarōn, Hašteank', Cop'k', and Xorjean ... [and] went to Vaspurakan to rebuke Vahan...». Vahan was the katholikos of Armenia (965-967) who was deposed as he was accused of having Chalcedonia leanings.

²⁰ ASOLIK, p. 176.

²¹ ASOLIK, p. 181.

²² ŁAFADARYAN (1957), p. 15.

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²⁰ ASOLIK, p. 176.

²¹ ASOLIK, p. 181.

²² ŁAFADARYAN (1957), p. 15.

and the emigration of Armenian clerics. At the beginning of his *History*, Kirakos presents the list of X-XIIIth century historians whose works were available to him; the same would also have been available to Vardan. The list includes the works of Yovhannēs Drasxanakertc'i, Movsēs Kałankatuac'i, Uxtanēs, Step'anos Asołik, Aristakēs Lastivertc'i, Matt'ēos Ūrhayec'i, Samuēl Anec'i and Vanakan Vardapet. Yovhannēs Drasxanakertc'i could not have written about the events of the 930s and 940s, since he died in 925²³. In the *History* of Bishop Uxtanēs only Anania of Narek appears and is cited as the patron of the work, but there is nothing said about his origin. Aristakēs Lastivertc'i and Movsēs Kałankatuac'i have no information about the present problem. Matt'ēos Ūrhayec'i, Samuēl Anec'i and Vanakan Vardapet, whose history is lost, are not primary sources. According to this list, the only primary source available to Kirakos and Vardan on the history of the 930s and 940s was Step'anos Asołik's *Universal History*.

If one were to take into consideration the similarity between the narratives of Vardan and Kirakos, one would conclude that the two historians either used the same source, or one took his information from the other. They either derived their material directly from Asołik's *History* or through an intermediary source, which could be the work of their teacher, the now lost *History of Armenia* by Vanakan Vardapet. Whether Asołik's *History* was used directly or indirectly by the above thirteenth century historians is of no consequence. Asołik's account was the only primary source available and it has been obviously misunderstood and misinterpreted.

According to Asołik, Father Yovhannēs, prior of the congregation of Kamrjajor, alone had been persecuted by Chalcedonians and taken asylum in the Bagratid kingdom. Asołik's testimony on the latter — "was driven away from the western land, the district of Egrisi, by the Chalcedonian sectarians who worship man" — has been extended to include the founders of other monasteries as well. Yet Asołik very specifically mentions one person who "was driven away from the western land". The geographical term "western land", which was apparently misunderstood by the thirteenth century historians and taken in reference to the Byzantine empire, is specifically Egrisi.

It seems that Egrisi as a geographical entity — *Eger of Egerac'ik* in Armenian — was not known to the Armenian historians of the

²³ See note 11 above.

thirteenth century. Kirakos does not mention it at all, whereas it appears in Vardan's *History* only once, but in a passage taken from the *History* of the historian Lewond. Both Vardan and Kirakos must have assumed that "the western land" was the Byzantine empire and that Egrisi was a province of the empire.

The earlier Armenian historians, including Asolik, identified Egrisi as the western part of Georgia, otherwise known as Mingrelia, which was a part of the kingdom of Abasgia/Abkhazia in the tenth century. The persecution against the monophysite Armenian clergy was, therefore, in the kingdom of Abasgia. Doctrinal conflicts surfaced between the Armenians and the Abasgians during the reign of King Abas Bagratuni. The Abasgian prince Bēr, according to Asolik, threatened to attack the city of Kars, Abas's capital, and have the newly built cathedral of the Holy Apostles consecrated according to Chalcedonian rite. Abas succeeded in seizing him and having him blinded²⁴.

Kirakos's information that Romanos Lekapenos was the author of the persecutions against the monophysite Armenian clergy is to be found in no other historian. This may be a conclusion of Kirakos based on the assumption that refugee clerics from the Byzantine empire came to Armenia at the time of Abas, a contemporary of Romanos. Another possibility is that it may be the result of a misinterpretation of a passage in the *Universal History* of Asolik. According to the latter, "At the time of Romanos, the emperor of the Greeks, and Abas king of Armenia, Melitene was seized from the Arabs in 383 [= 934/935]. Romanos drove out Alaxut'ēt', who persecuted our faith"²⁵. "Who persecuted" is expressed in the text of Asolik with the present participle *halacič'*, which is in apposition with the proper name Alaxut'ēt'. It is very possible that Kirakos did not recognize Alaxut'ēt', a foreign name that could easily be corrupted, as a proper noun. He may have omitted it because it was corrupt or taken it as an insulting epithet for Romanos and applied *halacič'*, 'persecutor', to the Byzantine emperor.

The evidence from tenth century historians indicates that the founders of Bagratid monastic institutions were not immigrants but local *vardapets* and priests who established new monasteries with the help of members of the royal house and feudal clans. The rise of new monastic institutions predates the period of King Abas and the emperor Romanos

²⁴ On Egrisi/Mingrelia, see TOUMANOFF (1963), pp. 267-268. On Prince Bēr, see ASOLIK, pp. 171-173.

²⁵ ASOLIK, p. 179.

and is closely connected with the political and socio-economic changes in Armenia, as the Bagratids became the masters of Transcaucasia and established kingdoms in Caucasian Albania, Armenia, and Georgia.

Earlier monasteries and monastic institutions in Armenia had been virtually wiped out as a result of the socio-economic collapse caused by heavy taxation imposed by the caliphate, massive rebellions and the elimination of the majority of the feudal clans and the clan bishoprics. It seems that the monastery of Mak'enoc'k' in the Gełark'unik' district of Siwnik' was the only monastic institution that survived the calamities of the eighth and ninth centuries. It was from here that the learned monk Maštoc' was invited to become the prior of a new monastery on the island of Sewan founded by Princess Mariam of Gełark'unik', the daughter of King Ašot I Bagratuni. This important event took place in 874, when Ašot I was already the lord and master of Transcaucasia, and soon thereafter several new institutions were established while older ones were either reopened or enlarged.

The monasteries that predate the ones mentioned by Asołik are greater in number. Among these are:

A) in Siwnik':

- 1) the monastery of Sewan, founded in 874;
- 2) Šołuagavank' in the 880s;
- 3) Vanevan in 903;
- 4) Gndevank' in 931;
- 5) Tat'ew at the beginning of the tenth century;
- 6) Xotakerac' vank' in 910;
- 7) Vahanavank' in 911;
- 8) the small fort/monastery in Biwrakan at the beginning of the tenth century;

B) in Vaspurakan:

- 9) Varagavank' at the beginning of the tenth century;
- 10) Joroyvank' cited at the end of the ninth century;
- 11) Ilu vank' at the beginning of the tenth century;
- 12) the hermitage of Lim in 884;

C) elsewhere:

- 13) the monasteries on Mt. Sepuh near Erzuka.

Recent epigraphical evidence and archaeological investigations on site have shown that some of these were older institutions that were revived

during the early Bagratid period and endowed with new churches and additional buildings²⁶. We must also note that C'axac' k'ar mentioned by Asolik was also an older institution.

The establishment of monastic institutions during the reign of Abas I was quite obviously the continuation of a movement initiated by the founding of the monastery of Sewan in 874.

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²⁶ MANUČ'ARYAN (1977), pp. 107-189, 228-256.

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